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ABSTRACT

This digest is intended to help parents and educators assist with the development of leadership attitudes and skills in gifted youth. The relative lack of interest in leadership despite its designation as a talent area in definitions of giftedness for state and federal policies requiring differentiated programs is listed. Characteristics of gifted youth that enable them to profit from leadership development are listed. Suggestions for parents include involving children in planning family activities and discussing current topics. Suggestions are provided for infusing curriculum concepts and skills into the sciences, humanities, and arts. Other school options for leadership development include: credit courses on leadership; implementation of personal plans for leadership development; and mentorships and internship programs. Extracurricular activities are particularly valuable in providing talented students with leadership experiences. Includes 15 references. (DB)

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DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP IN GIFTED YOUTH

Leadership Development and Gifted Students

All cultures need role models and leaders. Most of us agree that professions such as medicine, technology, education, business and industry, politics, and the arts need people who can use intelligence, creativity, and critical judgment. The role of parents and educators is critical in assisting with the development of leadership attitudes and skills in gifted youth.

Leadership has been designated a talent area in federal and state definitions of gifted students who require differentiated programs, yet it remains the least discussed of the curricular areas for these students in the literature, and it is not well defined.

Characteristics of Leadership in Gifted Youth

Few gifted programs identify students with high leadership potential or incorporate leadership education into their curricula. However, many characteristics of gifted youth enable them to profit from leadership development. Those characteristics include the following:

- The desire to be challenged.
- The ability to solve problems creatively.
- The ability to reason critically.
- The ability to see new relationships.
- Facility of verbal expression.
- Flexibility in thought and action.
- The ability to tolerate ambiguity.
- The ability to motivate others.

Parents and the Development of Leadership

Preparing young people for leadership responsibility begins in the home with an enriched environment that offers opportunities for children to acquire broad interests, self-esteem, and the insights and skills that characterize leaders. Parents can provide their children with support and encouragement as they participate in a wide variety of home and community activities. Parents should encourage their children to be involved in the selection, planning, execution, and evaluation of family activities ranging from a day at the zoo to a vacation overseas. Youngsters should also be encouraged to plan, initiate, and complete a variety of self-evaluated individual projects, but these skills are not learned automatically. They must be patiently taught and modeled by parents in the home.

Discussion and debate about current events and other topics foster independent thinking and nurture leadership potential. Parents who listen openly and thoughtfully without expecting children to embrace their social, political, and economic views are demonstrating leadership characteristics. Mutual respect, objectivity, empathy, and understanding are highly valued by gifted young people, particularly those who need a safe place to test their ideas.

Opportunities for decision making at an early age will help to foster the critical reasoning skills necessary to be an effective leader. Inappropriate decisions by children and youth, although difficult for parents to accept, may enhance future decision-making skills when self-evaluated.

Infusing Leadership Concepts and Skills Into the Curriculum

Major emphasis should be placed on leadership development in all academic areas, including the fine and performing arts. Thematic curriculum units and reading lists should include biographies and autobiographies of outstanding leaders. Students should be encouraged to analyze and evaluate the motivation, contributions, and influences of each leader and assess the leadership styles employed. Major events and family and other influences important in the life of each leader should be emphasized.

Sciences. Physical and biological sciences, mathematics, and social sciences provide unique opportunities for projects in which initiating, planning, critical thinking, creative problem solving, and decision making can be developed. They are rich with opportunities to learn about leaders who have influenced such areas as government and politics, science and technology, humanities and the arts, business and industry, philosophy and religion, and health science and medicine. Students can learn how their interests, passions, and abilities can develop into careers. They can compare the contributions of others with their own value systems. For example, many leaders have been concerned about poverty and the human condition.

Humanities. Language arts, speech, English, and other courses that emphasize oral and written communication provide opportunities for potential leaders to learn how to present ideas clearly and persuasively. Preparing and presenting speeches, listening to and critiquing presentations, writing news reports and editorials for school and other local publications, preparing for and engaging in debates, leading conference and discussion sessions, and participating in school and other election campaigns are only a few of the many options available. Group activities provide opportunities for young people to learn how to help others feel important and valued, accept their contributions, keep discussions relevant, and occasionally follow rather than lead.

Arts. Students can learn leadership skills and gain inspiration from talented people of the past and present who have enriched all of us through their contributions in the fine and performing arts. Their creative works, the trends they initiat-

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ed, and the enduring results of their efforts are worthy of study, as are their lives and the circumstances under which their work came to fruition.

Other School Options for Leadership Development

Several strategies strengthen and broaden educational experiences for gifted youth. Instructional units on leadership development should be provided at each grade level in a resource room or pullout administrative arrangement. Some secondary schools offer structured credit courses on leadership. Having students prepare and periodically update personal plans for leadership development, including provisions for obtaining the experiences set forth in their plans, is another promising activity. The value of this experience is enhanced when students share individual plans in group sessions, brief the group on their purpose, revise plans if the critique brings forth acceptable suggestions, report to peers on progress made after following the plans for a period of time, and evaluate the plans using self-designed criteria.

Mentorships and internship programs provide opportunities for youth to work with adult community leaders who are willing to help identify, develop, and nurture future leaders.

Leadership Through Extracurricular Activities

Since leadership is learned over time through involvement with others, extracurricular activities provide fertile ground for nurturing future leaders. Group participation offers unique opportunities for young people to belong, support others, and learn a variety of leadership styles. Students learn how to encourage others, create group spirit, and resolve conflict. They begin to understand diverse attitudes, skills, and talents and how to interact effectively with a diversity of people while working toward a common goal.

Leadership in extracurricular activities has been found to be more highly correlated with adult leadership than with academic achievement. A 10-year study conducted with 515 high school student leaders revealed that almost two-thirds of them participated in out-of-school organizations and athletics and more than half participated in fine arts activities.

Although there are many organized extracurricular activities for youth, those who want to develop their leadership potential can do so through less formal methods. Individuals or groups can plan special projects or a leadership plan by setting goals, objectives, and timelines toward a mission of improving some area of the school or community. Skills such as seeking all available information, defining a group task, and devising a workable plan may be developed through any community project. No matter how small or large the goal, the process involved in devising and implementing the plan develops leadership potential.

Leadership is much more than being elected or appointed to a position, and it is acquired most effectively through practice. Educators, parents, and other concerned adults who are interested in the development of leadership in gifted youth can make a difference in the lives of these students by providing them with opportunities to realize their leadership potential.

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